

SPEAK THE SPEECH

HAMLET: *HAMLET*

"WHAT A PIECE OF WORK..."

Who's Hamlet?

Hamlet is away at university when news arrives that Hamlet's parent, a monarch also named Hamlet, has died. Hamlet's other parent, Gertrude, almost immediately marries Claudius, a sibling of their former spouse. The ghost of the dead parent visits Hamlet, and claims to be the victim of murder at the hands of Claudius. The ghost asks Hamlet to take revenge. Hamlet doesn't know whether or not the ghost is real and can be believed, and so seeks to find out the truth before taking action.

What's happening when this speech is spoken?

After the encounter with the ghost, Hamlet's behaviour starts to change. Gertrude and Claudius each have reasons to be concerned about this, and so they send for two of Hamlet's school friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. They want these friends to visit with Hamlet, find out what's wrong, and report back to them. Although Rosencrantz and Guildenstern try to pretend that this is just a friendly visit, Hamlet presses them until they confess why they were sent. Hamlet answers them with this speech.

THE SPEECH:

I have of late—but wherefore I know not—lost all my mirth, forgone all custom of exercises; and indeed it goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory, this most excellent canopy, the air, look you, this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestic roof fretted with golden fire, why, it appears no other thing to me than a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours. What a piece of work is a man! how noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! in form and moving how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the world! the paragon of animals! And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust? man delights not me: no, nor woman neither, though by your smiling you seem to say so.



THE SPEECH: INDIVIDUAL THOUGHTS

Here's the speech, broken down into individual thoughts. Please note: this is just one way to breakdown the thoughts. It's subjective!

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exercises;

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seems to me a sterile promontory,

this most excellent canopy, the air, look you,
this brave o'erhanging firmament, this
majestical roof fretted with golden fire, why,
it appears no other thing to me than a foul
and pestilent congregation of vapours.

What a piece of work is a man!

how noble in reason!

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WORDS & PHRASES (that might be new or have an unexpected meaning)

- **of late** - lately
- **wherefore** - why
- **mirth** - enjoyment or happiness
- **forgone** - avoided or given up
- **custom** - habit or typical behaviour
- **exercises** - practice for the sake of training or improvement
- **heavily** - sluggishly, with really low energy
- **disposition** - we might call this mood
- **goodly** - handsome or beautiful in appearance
- **sterile** - incapable of supporting life
- **promontory** - a high point of land that juts out into the sea or other body of water
- **canopy** - something that hangs above and covers a space (like fabric, or trees, for example)
- **look you** - this expression can be to literally look, or to simply consider, used for emphasis
- **brave** - for Shakespeare this could mean splendid or impressive
- **o'erhanging** - overhanging
- **firmament** - a poetic name for the sky or the heavens above us
- **majestical** - possessing dignity and power
- **fretted** - carved with decorations
- **foul** - disgusting
- **pestilent** - full of infectious disease
- **congregation** - a gathering, usually of people but here used figuratively
- **vapours** - mists or fogs
- **noble** - of a distinguished or impressive character
- **reason** - the power to think clearly
- **faculty** - ability
- **express** - well designed and well formed
- **apprehension** - understanding
- **paragon** - the most outstanding example of something
- **quintessence** - the purest and most perfect form of something

EXPLORE

Use your brain, your heart, your imagination, your voice and/or your movement to embody this character and express yourself through the words. Try it lots of different ways as you follow these prompts.

EXPLORE THE WORDS

- Are the words short and simple, or long and complex?
- What do the words sound like?
- Are there any sounds that repeat?

EXPLORE THE STYLE

- Shakespeare's plays are written mostly in verse, but this speech is written in prose. Why do you think Shakespeare made this choice? How might the speech be different if it were in verse?

EXPLORE THE CHARACTER

Think about Hamlet's situation in the play: the recent death of a parent, the quick remarriage of the other parent, a ghost requesting revenge, the arrival of school friends to spy and report back...

- What do you think is happening in this speech?
- Why do you think Hamlet says these things?
- Why in this particular way?

EXPLORE THE IDEAS

In this speech, Hamlet lists things that may marvel others, but describes an indifferent or negative response to them.

- What might have caused this recent shift in perspective?
- Why do you think Hamlet tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern about this?
- Have you ever asked yourself big, existential questions?
- Who do you like to discuss these questions with?



CHALLENGE THE WORDS

William Shakespeare wrote his plays and poems more than 400 years ago, and his experience of the world was different from ours today. The meaning of words changes over time, as does their resonance. We encourage you to explore and interpret Shakespeare's language in your own ways, to discover how it resonates for you.

What do you do when specific words or phrases in Shakespeare's text feel hurtful or problematic? What about language that doesn't include you, or everyone you would like to include?

- In the speech above, is there anything you want to challenge? What possible alternatives can you imagine?
- Is there any language you find discriminatory or problematic? What solutions do you propose?

EMOTIONAL SUPPORT RESOURCES

If you or someone you know would like emotional support to deal with a feeling, issue or concern call one of the numbers below any time of the day or night. **Call 310-Mental Health at 310-6789** (no area code needed) if you:

- need emotional support to deal with a concern or feeling, or
- are looking for information on mental health resources or services.

Call Kid's Help Phone at **1-800-668-6868** if you are under 20 years of age to speak to a professional counsellor if you are:

- dealing with problems concerned with feelings or mood
- making a hard decision

